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THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

REFLECTIONS OF A VISITING BRITISHER¹

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

WHEN Mr. W. L. George, the distinguished British novelist, author of *The Second Blooming*, *A Bed of Roses*, and other admirable fictions, was stopped on the stairs Somewhere in America (he does not say exactly where) by a colored chambermaid who bluntly asked him a rather searching personal question, Mr. George was charmed. The occurrence seemed to him both picturesque and delightful, and an evidence of the existence of true democracy in the United States. The mere American, reading of this edifying event in Mr. George's new book,—a sheaf of "random impressions of a conservative English radical," as his sub-title describes it,—is entitled to feel some degree of perplexity. Presumably Mr. George was stopping in a hotel. It must have been somewhere in the East, the South, or the Middle West—for Mr. George kept away from Wyoming, Colorado, and other such negligible parishes. So his democratically curious chambermaid may have stopped him on the stairs of any hostelry in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Hartford, Worcester, Atlantic City, Savannah, Dayton ("that little city so monumental for its size"), Pittsburgh ("smoky, sullen"), Columbus ("spacious and gray"), "little Evansville, so elderly and quiet," Omaha ("big, grim, and wedded to utility"), Chicago ("savage, vain-glorious, where, in the short space of 22 months, 16 policemen were murdered on duty," where "there were 200 more divorces in one year than in the whole of England and Wales"—Mr. George did not care for Chicago), or in a dozen other communities. It is very tantalizing not to know more. It seems unlikely that Mr. George, an eminent visiting Englishman, who, as he tells us himself, was entertained with "lavish magnificence" in

¹ *Hail, Columbia!* By W. L. George. Harper and Brothers. New York: 1921.

America,—taken about in motors to the opera, to the theatre, to country clubs, shown “the famous view over the valley,” offered a choice of casaba melon or honeydew,—it seems unlikely, we say, that a visiting foreigner moving upon so hedonistic a plane should have found it necessary to stop at the kind of hotel where democratic colored chambermaids stop you on the stairs and question you about your affairs. It is really extraordinary. Why should the colored chambermaid have cared? It seems to us that the kind of person who asks you such blunt and imperative questions betrays an autocratic and regal, rather than a democratic, temper. We do not believe, in fact, that Mr. George knows a democratic chambermaid when he sees one.

Mr. George made an equally egregious error, it seems to us, in appraising the American woman, and the American attitude toward love. Mr. George gazed upon the countenance of female America, and concluded that her features are “more marked” than they are in Europe—“that seems to me,” he says, “the definition”: “the eyes are larger, the lips much thicker or thinner, the chin and jaw lines more pronounced”; everything, in short, is “more emphatic.” This cheerful generalization presumably takes into account the American woman who is the granddaughter of a Polish Jew as well as the one who is the granddaughter of an Adams; the American who is the granddaughter of a Dublin emigrant, as well as the American who is the granddaughter of a Swede; the American whose ancestors occupied deck-chairs on the *Mayflower* and the American whose mother milked goats in the Pyrenees.

Mr. George in his modest and persuasive preface disclaims generalization; yet that is, it often appears, his favorite method of estimation and comparison. Hear him, now, upon the exciting theme of Love among the Americans. How do Americans love? Very differently, you find, from the way Europeans love. Le Bon Dieu, when, on some off-day, he created the Americans, equipped them, it seems, with instincts, imaginations, anatomies, quite different from the European model. Mr. George’s theory postulates an American whose emigrating grandmother, a Kilkenny milkmaid, looked upon love as “a natural desire for intimacy with a person of the other sex”; then, somewhere between Queens-

town and Ellis Island, this notion of love suffered a sea-change; and, forty years later, the granddaughter, keeping company in Rahway, N. J., with Llewellyn Smith, the local druggist, exhibits "certain peculiarities in the conception of love." She does not, we learn, regard love, as did her enlightened grandmother, as "a natural desire for intimacy with the other sex": she has built her conception of love upon a phrase—a phrase that is distasteful to Mr. George: "the Divinity of Sex." He says it is a phrase that he cannot understand. Neither can we. Moreover, we have been in Rahway; we have met druggists; we have met granddaughters of Irishwomen; we have heard much talk about Sex, and a little (not much) about Divinity: but we have yet to hear such a phrase as "the Divinity of Sex." We have known love to be regarded as "Divine," of course; but that is a peculiarity not of American lovers, but of all lovers in the first flush of lyric exaltation—a spontaneous expression of their quaintly generous tendency to impute to God whatever seems too wonderful to have originated in the heart of man. If Mr. George really discovered here a wide use of the phrase, "Divinity of Sex," (which we refuse to believe), we are disposed to agree with him in regarding it as a foolish phrase; though we know less about the operations and the limitations of Divinity than Mr. George does, and less about the nature and origin of the emotion of Sex; though it seems to us that if Divinity had or has anything to do with human life, there is no valid reason for supposing that it has no mandate over sex,—sex being, as even Mr. George would admit, a valid function of human life. If it could be proved to us that the lovers of Rahway actually do talk about "the Divinity of Sex," we should still deny that the fact sets them apart from the lovers of Kilkenny; and we think it a bit thick on Mr. George's part to assume that the operations of the instinct of sex, and the way people feel about it (as distinct from the nonsense they talk about it), are one thing in Europe, and a different thing in America.

We find Mr. George, indeed, rather naïve in most of his reporting. He listened to some yeasty suburban chatter from a "young lady" at "a small but high-browed gathering" who, as quoted by Mr. George, discoursed as follows:

YOUNG LADY: "Mr. George, I'm just crazy to know what you think of Miss May Sinclair."

MR. GEORGE: "Well"

YOUNG LADY: "What I like about Miss Sinclair is—her sense of the universal cosmos. Now in my home town in Oregon they want to know just what you think."

MR. GEORGE: "From the—"

YOUNG LADY: "If you think she coördinates the analyses of the psyche of her characters, then what I want to know is how she correlates the theory of the moron with that of the urning. . . ."

[*She continues. MR. GEORGE is later discovered concealed in the refrigerator.*]

Perhaps Mr. George really supposed that such crude and disingenuous satire would entertain the readers of *Harper's Magazine*, wherein his "random impressions" were first published. But if the audience of that excellent periodical, who were brought up on the writing of Thomas Hardy and Henry James and W. D. Howells, were amused by Mr. George's heavy burlesque, we renounce our respect for them. If, however, Mr. George really believed that he was faithfully reporting the kind of talk that is characteristic of what he calls "literary circles" in America, he is not only more naïve than we had supposed, but he causes one to wonder who it was in America that took Mr. George around, and where they took him, and why? He refers somewhere else in his book to "the well-educated American woman" whose conversation "runs more than is comfortable on French literature, Claudel, Marcel Proust, Paul Fort." But this sort of American woman, says Mr. George, "embarrasses the Englishman for two reasons: one of them is that he is accustomed to talking to women about plays, games, holiday resorts, etc., or, if he belongs to a more evolved type, of love. The second reason is that he is not accustomed to being told what the woman thinks; he is accustomed to tell her what *he* thinks." Therefore, the American woman who talks to him of Claudel and Paul Fort seems to him a disconcerting freak, and the one who talks gibberish about "correlating the theory of the moron with that of the urning" is "an instance of what can happen to a woman who has taken in her culture in too large doses and too fast." Upon which one can only comment: Is it then so strange a thing in England to meet women who read and think, and can discuss Claudel and

Paul Fort? And are words like "moron" and "cosmic" and "coördinate" and "correlate" and "psyche" terms so strange and abstruse that they suggest merely parody and guffaws to Englishmen as remote from illiteracy as Mr. George? Or is all this simply Mr. George's response to his conception of the requirements of magazine humor?

Many other oddities of American civilization impressed Mr. George. He was surprised to find that in clubrooms and at parties men call each other "Tommy" and "Ogden" and "Jake." This struck him as "superficial," though he is "sure that the American male friendships are very strong,—strong, at least, so far as male friendships go." (Are "male friendships," you wonder, uncommon in England? We did not know it.) Mr. George was also amused by the fact that in America "a dentist is called 'doctor,'" and that corporations have "presidents" and "vice-presidents." But he was confronted by American peculiarities more gravely arresting. A woman's club which had applied to him for a lecture date refused to engage him because his photograph exhibited him in a dressing-gown which exposed his neck. Mr. George should have known better than to send an obscene photograph to a woman's club. Where did he think he was: in ancient Pompeii or Alexandria or Gomorrah? And what should an Englishman talk about to an American woman who possesses "an active, prehensive mind within an attractive form"? The poor perplexed devil meets "a woman in the middle twenties"; her skin is clear and beautiful; she is well-manicured; she wears "an attractive frock of chiffon, which is not crumpled"; she is "a woman with whom he feels he ought to exchange some sentimentalities, this being the thing to do." Only he does not know how to begin. She is too serious, too interested; she seems too aloof from these natural things—including "the better employment" of "those well-cut lips that are wasting their time in discussing psychoanalysis." Should he begin with an epigram of Bernard Shaw's? Or with Bergson? Or Pragmatism? Or should he "plunge, and talk of love," getting back to "the firm ground of his intersexual concept"? One's heart goes out to Mr. George. What, you will ask, *did* he do? Well, he asked an American man for advice, having concluded that there he would

find knowledge concerning "the emotional temperament of the American man's country women." But the American male, "being on that day in a cynical mood instead of in his normal state of rhapsody," gave Mr. George (he tells us) "advice which I cannot reproduce here." We call that a shabby trick on the part of Mr. George. The male American knew the answer to that engrossing question, and he told the answer to Mr. George: yet Mr. George (warned, perhaps, by the memory of that over-exposed negative from the woman's club) secretes the answer beneath his licentious dressing-gown.

Many things in America, however, gave pleasure and satisfaction to Mr. George. He liked the "immersion heater" which enables you to warm your cup of coffee by dipping a stick of metal into the fluid; he liked the electric warming-pad which will relieve an ache in "any part of yourself"; he liked the mail-chute outside your bedroom door on the thirty-sixth floor of your hotel, the dropper that comes attached to the cork in the bottle of eye-lotion, the electric potato-peeler, the protective cardboard in the newly-laundered shirts, the barber-shop that is "a Mohammedan paradise," the hotels with their drug-stores, stockbrokers, osteopaths, candy-stores, notary publics, doctors, safe-deposits; he liked the night-shift of stenographers, enabling you to get out of bed at three in the morning and summon "a cool, tidy girl" who will take down your letters. This perfection of mechanical civilization solaced Mr. George. He is willing, apparently, to find compensation for the lady who had swallowed too much "culture" and was impervious to aphrodisiacs, by contemplating the satisfactions of the stenographic night-shift. "O Lady, we receive but what we give!" said Coleridge; and that is still dishearteningly true.

All in all, Mr. George is gracious, tolerant, benign, sympathetic. He is even embarrassing in certain of his tributes—as when he assures his own countrymen, in a passage full of nobly indignant protest against the bigotry of the more stupid type of English visitor, that "a few dinner-parties or week-ends in American homes would show the Englishman that America has a gentleman class akin to his own,—in Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Virginia, even New York,—which did not come over last week,

which does *not* struggle for money, does *not* ask personal questions, does *not* boast." Undeserved rewards, as Meredith remarked, are exquisite. But this is overwhelming. Mr. George is alive, of course, to our deficiencies. The American male, as a type, struck him as being, where women are concerned, both forward and backward—aggressive in trifling ways, timorous "when the situation grows intense." For example, "he will use a chance opportunity in an elevator, but will not create one in the street, as if he were afraid of something." But Mr. George says nothing which leaves us to infer that he is pessimistic about the future growth in the sexual predaceousness of the American male. We are still a young people, and there is hope.

Mr. George likes us, but he will not come to live among us. He is too old, he says, to change—too set, too European. But what could be more generous than his peroration?—If, he says, "I had to be born again (as I was born) of a family that had no influence worth anything, no money, no lineage—if I had to make my way again (as I had to) against difficulties such that at the age of twenty-five all I possessed was a hundred dollars of debts, well . . . in spite of all temptations to belong to other nations I should have felt that there was only one place for a young man who wanted to tear from life full value for his efforts; in spite of all temptations I should have been born an American."

What could be handsomer?

LAWRENCE GILMAN.